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ABSTRACT

This "ERIC Digest" discusses the components of an effective educational program for students who are gifted. The paper defines the term "program" and distinguishes between programs and provisions. Eight major components of an effective program are noted: needs assessment, definition of population, identification procedures, program goals, program organization and format, staff selection and training, curriculum development, and program evaluation. A list of 15 references is appended. (JDD)

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DEVELOPING PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS OF HIGH ABILITY

Sandra L. Berger

As educators undertake the task of program planning to accommodate the diverse abilities students bring to school, they are faced with a bewildering array of choices. In education for students who are gifted, a variety of theories and models have been developed. Instructional methods and materials of all types are presented with enthusiasm, each claimed to be "ideal" for students of high ability. To make sound decisions, educators need to understand the components of an effective educational program for these students.

What constitutes an effective program?

A *program* "is part of the mainstream of education and doesn't rise and fall with public opinions" (Morgan, Tennant, & Gold, 1980, p. 2). It is a comprehensive, sequential system for educating students with identifiable needs (The Association for the Gifted [TAG], 1989); is often designed by a curriculum committee; and is supported by a district or school budget. Like literature and mathematics programs, programs for students with high ability are assumed to be integral parts of a school curriculum. Teaching strategies may change, but the question of whether or not they should be a part of the curriculum is never raised.

A distinction should be made between *programs* for students who are gifted students and *provisions* for these students (Tannenbaum, 1983). "*Provisions* are fragmentary, unarticulated, and temporary activities, which are neither followed-up in any meaningful way nor preceded by any meaningful lead-in activity" (Morgan, Tennant, & Gold, 1980, p. 2). For example, a teacher with vision and energy might recognize that a particular student needs to have his or her curriculum modified and decide to provide special activities. However, unless there is a commitment on the part of the school system to continue meeting the student's needs and to offer similar opportunities to other able students at each grade level, it does not constitute a program. When budgetary cuts have to be made, enrichment provisions become expendable.

What are the components of an effective program?

An effective program comprises eight major components. These are described in the following paragraphs.

Needs Assessment. A program is an integrated curriculum response to the educational needs of a group of students. Therefore, a logical first step is to determine what needs should be met. *Need* is defined as the discrepancy between the current status and a desired status and indicates a direction in which an individual or school system wants to move. An effective needs assessment enables educators to gather information about the nature and instructional needs of the students and the resources of the school or school district. Information about community attitudes and teacher skills may also be gathered. Borland (1989) has provided a list of useful questions that might be asked, possible sources of information, and ways to obtain it.

Definition of Population. A clear definition of the population serves as the foundation of a program. The definition should be based on information gleaned from the needs assessment and state and local requirements. It should address specific abilities and traits possessed by persons of high ability. In his 1971 *Report to Congress*, Marland (1972) included a definition that is well known for its diversity and usefulness. Updated in 1981 (P.L. 97-35, the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act), this definition has provided guidance to many states. Other programs are based on a multidimensional view of intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985). However, a local frame of reference gleaned from the needs assessment is equally important.

Identification Procedures. The purpose of identification is to locate students whose needs are not being met by the core curriculum, evaluate their educational needs, and provide them with an appropriate program. Identification procedures must be consistent with the definition in local use and should measure diverse abilities.

Identification is generally divided into several phases that might be conceptualized as a pyramid. The base of the pyramid involves the entire student body and is typically called *screening*. As the process evolves, the population becomes smaller. The apex of the pyramid comprises the students who will participate in a program. A wide variety of instruments and methods are used as the pyramid narrows. Student records and portfolios, parent and teacher referrals and recommendations, anecdotal evidence, student products, group tests, and individual tests are just some of the ways information is gathered throughout the school year. The identification process should be ongoing and articulated with curriculum options.

Program Goals. The goals of a program should be written as clear policy statements of what the district will do to respond to the needs of the target population. They should be stated broadly and may refer to desired student outcomes. Outcomes should reflect the assessed needs of the students. Since program goals should be made available to the public, they should be stated in easily understood language. A comprehensive plan might also state program objectives and

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suggested activities. Borland (1989), Clark (1988), Maker (1982), VanTassel-Baska and colleagues (1988), and other textbook authors have provided examples of justifiable program goals and objectives.

Program Organization and Format. Organization and format refer to decisions on how students will be grouped for instruction, where instruction will take place, how often instruction will occur, who will provide instruction, and who will be responsible for the program and the administrative organization. Like other program components, organization and format are derived in part from the needs assessment. The choice of format(s) involves a number of complex decisions regarding effective delivery of educational services and includes fiscal considerations. The central question is, "Which format(s) will best serve the needs of the defined population(s)?" Special magnet schools, pull-out programs, a school within a school, full-time self-contained classes, resource rooms, effective grouping arrangements based on specific needs, and mainstreaming are just some of the available options (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985; Daniel & Cox, 1988; Eby & Smutny, 1990).

Staff Selection and Training. Selection and training of staff are crucial to the success or failure of a program for students of high ability (Renzulli, 1975). But how can an administrator select the people who will ultimately inspire students and others? Researchers have consistently identified effective teachers as those who "are all things to all people." No definitive profile of the ideal teacher for these students has been published to date. However, interest in and eagerness to work with students who are curious and highly able are essential.

As with other program components, staff selection and training should relate to the needs of the target population. If students are transported to a central location, they need a teacher who has had some experience with self-contained classes. Above all, teachers in programs for students who are gifted should have a demonstrated understanding of these students (TAG, 1989). If teacher selection precedes curriculum development, the teacher will have a critical influence on what will be taught. Because good programs for students of high ability often grow, it is useful to have a core staff who can model effective teaching and collaboration for new teachers.

Curriculum Development. The most effective curriculum includes substantive scope and sequence and is based on the needs of the target population (TAG, 1983; VanTassel-Baska et al., 1988). School systems that purchase packaged programs should consider whether or not they are sufficiently rigorous, challenging, and coherent. Appropriate curriculum produces well-educated, knowledgeable students who have had to work hard, have mastered a substantial body of knowledge, and can think clearly and critically about this knowledge.

Maker (1982) has explained how to differentiate curriculum for students who are gifted in terms of process, content, and product. Her discussion enables educators to develop appropriate objectives based on the school system's core curriculum. VanTassel-Baska and colleagues (1988) have provided theoretical bases, specific procedures, and practical applications.

Program Evaluation. The evaluation component is critical because it allows a school system to reassess student needs and determine the efficiency and effectiveness of its various program components (Callahan, 1983; Callahan & Caldwell, 1986). Evaluation should be both formative (ongoing) and summative (final outcomes). Evaluation enables a school system to make midcourse corrections and answers the question, "Is this program doing what we want it to do?"

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